

Sunday 4th November 2018
Adoption – God makes us His children

We are considering the first fourteen verses of Ephesians chapter one. Some may think that we are taking a long time to get through them and wonder why. There are a number of reasons. The opening chapters of the book see Paul in a rapture of expression. He piles layer after layer of wonderful truth on us, and it is easy to miss the import of what is being said if we do not linger. If we go too quickly, it would be like fast forwarding an epic film. We would see all the action, but it would be crammed and we would miss so much, we might also misunderstand the whole story!

We must also consider the way the Bible speaks about being a Christian. It talks about it as a growing process and a journey. Journeys may be getting quicker, I concede, but Christian growth is compared to the growth of a tree, and an oak tree at that. We can grow a lettuce in a few weeks, but not an oak! We can nip next door, but a trip around the world takes a good bit longer. So it is with Scripture, it takes time to understand the message, and even longer to digest it, and longer again to assimilate it, and longer again to become proficient in living in it. Who would you prefer to do your appendix operation? Someone who had read Gray's Anatomy and had a sharp pen knife, or someone who had done the basic six years to become a doctor, and then some years of practicing medicine, and then trained under a competent surgeon until they become proficient and experienced in the principle and the practice of surgery? I think the answer is self evident!

I have, over the years, met folk who had read an article in a Christian magazine, and now claimed that that they knew all about the subject. It is better to take time and learn the principles and the practice of the faith, not just have some faint notion of things. For example, I have noticed in myself and others, that the idea that 'all things work together for good,' is fine until my will is crossed or what I hoped fails to come, then all of a sudden we are put out, cross, and actually rebellious! It takes time and application for truth to transform our inner and outer life. All this is worked by the Holy Spirit within us. Often we quench and grieve and resist his working for years! If we read some good biographies of Christian life, we would see the struggles that some of the best went through to grow up into useful sons.

In the list of spiritual blessings that arise from the God's gracious choosing of people, is the fact of Adoption. The idea is current enough in our society for us to have a good idea of what is involved.

The Biblical idea of Adoption is similar to our cultural practice, but on a much more significant scale when the parties involved are considered. Let us consider some aspects of the principles of Adoption.

1. If adoption brings a lost, orphaned and unwanted child into a family which will love it and care for it, then the Biblical concept of adoption goes further. God adopts not just orphaned people, but lost, fallen and hostile people. God adopting a person not only

undoes the effect of the Fall of Adam, it raise believers up to a higher place and relationship with God than Adam ever had. Genesis tells us that God formed man of the clay of the earth and breathed the breath of life into him and he became a living being. By adoption, God not only gives us breath, but we are given the life of Christ within us. When someone becomes a Christian, something supernatural happens. By God's power, something so wonderful and significant happens that it is called a new birth, a new creation, because now a person has Christ within them. Now that is something that takes time and labour to unpack, believe and enter into a life experience by faith.

2. The model that Paul has in mind when he uses the image of Adoption to describe and explain salvation is the model of Roman adoption. Apparently, Jewish people did not do things like this, so Paul borrows from Roman culture, which was present in those days due to the Roman dominion in those lands and times.

A childless, wealthy Roman who desired his name to continue after his death, would adopt a son. The adoption would be of a well grown and a fine upstanding young man. This fine specimen would be adopted by a legal process which, once done could not be undone. We could say that the adopted son was chosen to live in such a way as to bring honour to the adopted father both in the father's lifetime and more so after his death. We could use Paul's words in verse 6. The son was to live so as to cause people to praise the glory of the father. The adopted son was to live in such a way that the goodness, worth and character of the adoptive father would stand out. There is no need to apply this, the meaning is obvious.

There is a contrast here which is worth drawing attention to. The Roman chose a fine upstanding specimen of a man to adopt. God does not work that way. When we get to chapter 2 of Ephesians, the contrast will become very apparent. For now, it is enough to say that God does not chose people because they are fine and upstanding. On the contrary, He chooses those who are slaves to sin, who are dead to God, these He takes and regenerates, that is, He makes them alive again spiritually, and then adopts them to become members of His family, His kin.

We see this dynamic all through scripture. God chose Abraham because He chose to, not because off anything notable in Abraham. Abraham knew that this was true. When he prayed for Sodom, he referred to himself as dust and ashes, which is not the language of someone who has a high notion of themselves. God chose Jacob, that slimy cheater of a man. God chose Him and worked on Him and changed him and made him different.

We need to get cleared from the idea that there is anything in us or about us that God responds to. God choses, we respond, not the other way about. God choosing is also different from our way of choosing. If you are male, you may have experienced the break-time football team choosing. Two captains would usually appoint themselves – the two best players, and then turn about, all those who wanted to play would be chosen. The best players would be chosen first until the duffers were left, and given to the other team!

This is not how God does things. 1 Corinthians 1.26 and forward tells a different story. God chooses nobodies and makes them somebodies. Read it and see. Anybody can become a somebody with God, but few listen or seek or take the time to examine this. Psalm 14 calls such people fools.

3. In the Roman adoptive system, rights and privileges are conferred, and obligations and duties are enjoined. The adopted son is given all the privileges of a natural son. He is given the right of full inheritance as if he were a natural born son. All that the father has will be inherited and is now available for the use of the son by the father's permission. The adoptive father also is given the full rights of a father of a natural son. Ephesians 1.3 shows this. Every spiritual blessing is given to God's adopted children, and Hebrews 12.5 reminds us that there is parental discipline to make the son worthy and obedient to the father. Both sides exist.

Spiritually, when we become Christians, we have rank and privileges conferred on us. Galatians 4.1-7 and Romans 8.17. We are heirs of the Father and Joint heirs with the Son, that is, with Christ. Jesus is the eternally begotten Son of the Father, we are adopted sons. We do not get everything at once, we are to grow up and mature, and as we do so, we become possessors of what we have been given. No father, I hope would let his three year old play with a chain saw, or drive a real car. Those things are for when the son has grown up and has the strength and maturity to use and enjoy them. At three years old, they would kill us! So it is with spiritual blessings, we grow into fuller understanding of them and ability to exercise them appropriately, as we grow up into Christ. It is not about our age, it is about our spiritual growth and maturity.

4. We must think about this in a practical way. What sort of blessing is adoption, what is its nature? Do we get a badge to wear or a certificate? Is it a feeling we get, or an emotional experience? Think of those TV programs where children separated at birth are reunited in older age. Sometimes it is all tears and hugs and smiles and then more tears and hugs again. You know what I mean. Is that what happens to us when we are adopted by God? Probably not.

Adoption is a forensic matter. It is something that God does for us, without our involvement in the first place. It is a legal matter decided in, as it were, God's court. God chooses us, adopts us, and it is a transaction that happens pretty much with us being unaware of the magnitude of what has been accomplished on our behalf. It is only as we learn in the Scriptures about what God has done for us, in and through Christ, that light begins to dawn on us and in us.

It is as we meditate on the truth of the Word regarding our adoption, and believe it, that faith works to bring the realization of its significance to life in our souls. This is worked by the indwelling Holy Spirit. Do you remember the elder brother in the story of the prodigal? He complained that in all the years that he had served his father, that he had never been given even a goat to have a meal with his friends. The father replied that all he had was his son's to use as he wished. The elder son had not been exercising his

privileges as a son because he did not realise that he could. This is not a license for a free for all or for boastfulness. It is the privilege that enables us to conform to the nature of Christ's sonship, God's only begotten Son delighted to do God's will, not His own.

We grow in our awareness of sonship by faith, and we walk in it by faith, our hearts and characters being conformed to the sonship of Christ. This will result in gratitude, joy and great thankfulness, but it is not a one-off experience. It is not so much an experience to tick off our bucket list as it is a life to grow in and experience as it becomes part of our own fabric of whom we are becoming, as it were. There are duties and responsibilities that come with our adoption as well as privileges, and both constitute the reality of this truth and blessing in Christ. We could say that when we are adopted, we are apprenticed to, and inherit the family business, and this takes application and growth. The passage in Galatians 4.1-7 explains this, it is a growing process which develops greater richness as we mature spiritually, not just as we age. The two should go together, but so often do not do so.

5. We are adopted by the Sovereign pleasure of God. Years ago, Cliff Richard recorded an old song that went, 'why me Lord, what have I ever done,' to be worthy and so on. The answer then and forever is that we have done nothing to be worthy of God's least interest, it is all of His grace. The Potter chooses what He will do with the clay.

However, it is important for our spiritual wellbeing and our emotional and mental health that we grow to realise that, while there is nothing in us that God desires or needs, when God places His love and affection upon us, it corresponds to His nature and Person. He loves us with infinite, eternal, and boundless love, with a passion and tenderness which is beyond our comprehension. Indeed, for all eternity, God's love for us will forever be being displayed in ways and measures that are new and unique to us. He will never cease to love us, His love will never grow old, faint or thin. He will never tire of loving us, He will never love any other. I write this, and know it, but the depth of my knowing is slight, but then there is an eternity to grow in the knowledge of it.

Turn to Hosea 11.1. Can you see the deep passion and love and grief of God in this passage? We may not feel or know or experience much of the realization of our being a child of God in Christ, but God has felt the full force of His love for us from eternity, so He is ahead of us when it comes to the experience of being a loving Father.

We do not deserve or earn this grace of adoption, but receive it as a gift of grace, because it pleases the heart of God to do this for us. In fact, it raptures the heart of God to adopt a family. The challenge is not to be like those children in Hosea who proved to be faithless, but to grow in faithfulness to be like Christ, God's perfect Son. Isaiah 1.2 is a portrait of prodigal children, as adopted children we are to grow up into our granted privileges and obligations, and these we will look at next time we look at Ephesians after Remembrance Sunday, which is next week.